

# **WOMEN IN THE ARMY: EXPERIENCES OF A BATTALION COMMANDER**

by

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**T**here have been numerous studies, papers, and articles written about women in the Army or about women in the armed services, one of the most recent of which is by Martin Blumenson and appeared in the May 1979 issue of *Army*. However, there are few records of *personal* experience.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to record my observations and opinions resulting from 22 months experience as battalion commander of a unit with 85 to 100 female soldiers assigned out of a total strength of 507 enlisted.

To gain perspective, a few words should be said about the battalion, as it was a unique unit and offered unusual opportunities to observe female soldiers. The 64th Support Battalion was organic to a separate mechanized infantry brigade, the 4th Brigade, 4th Infantry Division (Brigade '76). As the logistical base for the brigade, the 64th was responsible for providing direct support in the areas of maintenance, medical, finance, military police, legal, postal, personnel, data processing, and transportation services, as well as all classes of supply and maintenance management. In addition, the battalion also operated Europe's largest dining facility, a Military Affiliate Radio System (MARS) station, and a Communications Center. During my tour as commander, the 64th was activated, organized, trained, and subsequently deployed from Fort Carson, Colorado, to Wiesbaden, Germany. The combination of a great diversity of military occupational specialties (MOSS)—87— in the battalion, service in both the United States and in Germany, and extensive periods of field duty gave me a view of female soldiers not normally experienced in battalion command.

To begin, and as a general comment, female soldiers occupying "traditional" roles (i.e., typist and medic) were outstanding. Those female soldiers who were in "non-traditional" jobs such as military police, heavy equipment operators, cooks, and drivers were limited only by the lack of sufficient upper body strength, but they proved to be equally outstanding in every other aspect. These comments apply not only

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to the narrow concept of "duty performance" but also to the more important "total soldier" concept. There were, of course, individual exceptions, but my overall conclusion is that female soldiers are as dedicated, motivated, and professional as their male counterparts. Let me comment on specific areas.

### FIELD DUTY

During the initial stages of the battalion's organization and training, I was extremely concerned about the capability of female soldiers to adapt to field conditions. To my surprise, the female soldiers experienced no more difficulty than their male counterparts. The only problems occurred among those female soldiers who had not had previous field duty assignments. As they gained experience, as with any soldier, they quickly adapted to the field environment. Worries about sanitary conditions and sleeping arrangements proved to be unfounded. I quickly discovered that the soldiers found two latrines in any given area to be a waste of effort. A reversible "Male-Female" sign on one worked just as well. (Has anyone ever found the men's room on a bus or an airplane?)

Sleeping arrangements are a more touchy subject. Thoughts of strict separation, security, and privacy quickly come to mind. In fact, practical solutions were readily worked out. During our first few field experiences, we experimented with "female tents" separated from the male area. This arrangement proved not only to cause double work in preparing two areas, but it also caused problems with unit work schedules, females on shift duty, and unit defensive assignments. In time, we progressed to a situation where units with a high percentage of females used "female tents" within their areas, while other units partitioned their tents, and in some cases male and female soldiers working alternating shifts used the same tent. Common sense was the rule. Soldiers who worked together in a unit respected each other and had no problems. On the other hand, it would have been foolish

to put three female soldiers from one unit into a partitioned tent with male soldiers from another unit.

In addition to my own experience, the *Women Content in Units Force Development Test (MAX WAC)* also confirmed the desirability of eliminating duplicative sleeping and latrine facilities.<sup>2</sup>

REFORGER experience likewise seemed to indicate that male and female soldiers who knew each other well did not experience difficulties in the field. A recent report stated:

The women agreed that the male soldiers in their own units did not demonstrate excessive sexual aggressiveness toward them during the field exercise. In fact, if anything, the men in their units shielded them from the undesirable advances of men from other units.<sup>3</sup>

As I indicated earlier, the soldiers of the 64th knew each other and had a sense of unit identity. They had worked together in garrison and were therefore not strangers in the field. This, in contrast to a normal Forward Area Support Team (FAST) composed of troops from three battalions, enabled practical arrangements to be made in the field.

Regarding heavy work, I found that each section and company had its own way of distributing the workload and that a "female policy" was not needed. Female soldiers dug

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latrines, assisted in erecting tents, cleaned stoves, and carried their fair share of other duties. The important factor was that the battalion did not allow supervisors to assign heavy work to males only. Again, common sense applied. All-female work parties would have had difficulty in erecting a maintenance tent or a hospital ward; mixed work crews, however, worked well. My experience indicated that female soldiers adapt as well as male soldiers to field conditions, and REFORGER experience further supports this conclusion.<sup>4</sup>

### PREGNANCY

Statistics from fiscal year 1976, which is roughly parallel to the time frame of my command, indicate that:

...approximately eight percent of the women become pregnant each year and 5.4 percent of the women on active duty go to term and deliver a child each year. The average pregnancy carried to term causes 105 days lost time or 29 percent of a manyear. At any given time, 3.8 percent of the women can be expected to be pregnant or on postnatal convalescent leave. For the Army, some 40 percent of the women giving birth on active duty request release from active duty after postnatal care.<sup>5</sup>

During my tour as commander, the female strength of the battalion reached a high of 100 out of 507 enlisted soldiers. There was a total of seven pregnancies. Of the seven, two were unmarried. Only the two unmarried elected to stay in the Army, although three of the others initially expressed a desire to do so.

Although the number of pregnancies in the battalion was statistically less than Army experience—about three percent versus eight percent—the requests of those giving birth to leave the service were slightly higher than the Army-wide average. This was probably due to the difficulties of caring for small children in an overseas environment and was also probably influenced by the battalion's "equal pay, equal work" attitude. Soldiers knew and understood that the problems of parenthood

would not be solved by the chain of command assigning field duty, charge of quarters (CQ), and other details to other soldiers. The Army average of 105 days lost time per pregnancy is well above that which I experienced. In the 64th, the average was closer to 60 or 70 days. The chain of command maintained close liaison with the brigade surgeon, and prenatal leave was kept to a minimum. This was not intended as a harsh measure, but as a realistic one, based on a competent medical evaluation of each person and her capability to continue to function as a soldier while pregnant. Field duty during early pregnancy was not a problem. When it did preclude field duty, female soldiers were simply left in garrison to perform necessary "stay behind" duties. (The obvious drawback to this situation would, of course, be deployment for combat.)

One current report indicates that preferential treatment concerning assignments, duty hours, lost time, and similar matters causes a high degree of resentment among male soldiers.<sup>6</sup> I believe that the close personal involvement of the chain of command helped to avoid this situation in the 64th. As long as meaningful duties could be assigned, pregnant females were encouraged to work. Although not pertinent to this paper, it is interesting to note that even though pregnancy is the major cause of lost time among women, they still do not have as much lost time as men.<sup>7</sup> I will discuss the issue of the sole parent later.

A last comment concerning pregnancy is the somewhat emotional issue of birth control. Female officers and NCOs were encouraged to insure that female soldiers were aware of birth control aids available to them. Discussions were on a factual basis, with no moralizing overtones. Soldiers were neither encouraged nor discouraged as to obtaining birth control aids. The intent was simply to insure that each soldier had the necessary information upon which to base a personal decision. Advice concerning abortion was left strictly to medical officers and the chaplains.

One additional area which should be

addressed is that of replacing the female soldier who ultimately elects to leave the Army after having her baby. As stated above, there is a 40-percent chance that she will request discharge after postnatal care. However, she often may not make the actual request and start processing for discharge until after the baby has been born. In that event, the commander finds himself faced with an imminent loss, but he cannot requisition a replacement until after the soldier actually makes her decision and requests discharge. When she does, the discharge process is much faster than the normal replacement process, and the commander is left with a vacancy and possibly a long wait for the replacement.

### COMBAT

Numerous documents exist which support the role of women in combat.<sup>8</sup> Historical examples of Russian sniper units in World War II, or of the all-female Soviet 125th Day Bomber Regiment, the 586th Air Defense Fighter Interceptor Regiment, and the 588th Night Bomber Regiment are often cited. The role of women in combat within the US Army is well-defined, and it is not my intention to open the emotional issue of women serving in ground combat units. I mention the Russian experience only as historical fact and as supporting evidence that women can perform in active combat. It is also worth noting that historically women have been used in active combat only when the nation-state's survival was threatened.

As the commander of a support battalion operating within the brigade rear area, I considered that I had two main ground threats. These threats were either from a fast-moving reconnaissance element or from a large unit that had made a breakthrough. Either case could lead to a surprise situation. Therefore, troops were trained for a reaction role using small arms and light antitank weapons (LAWs). Hasty ambush positions were habitually identified with a view toward stopping an enemy advance until artillery, air, or other combat units could be employed. In the one instance (Exercise CERTAIN

FIGHTER) that this plan was put into effect, our female soldiers aggressively and eagerly took part in defense of the battalion position. The attack was by a mechanized infantry battalion with attached armor, which had broken through the brigade front. In all, the 64th received credit for having destroyed one "enemy" tank, several armored personnel carriers (APCs), one entire infantry company, and the aggressor battalion command section. Female soldiers were in the ambush team which eliminated the opposing command structure, and a female soldier was given sole credit for the tank "destroyed." It is no secret that a support battalion has limited defensive capability against armor and mechanized infantry, and to complete the story, it must be said that the opposing force got credit for a support battalion rendered "combat ineffective." The point is, however, that we did not have "girls running around the woods screaming." The female soldiers reacted as they had been trained to and would have inflicted casualties upon the enemy. In so doing, a large portion of our battalion would have avoided capture. How would female soldiers react in an actual situation? Who knows? But we must also ask how male soldiers would react in the same situation. Again, who really knows until it happens? I can only say that I saw soldiers, both male and female, reacting as they were trained. My experience indicates that women are entirely capable of actively defending a unit. Of course, the public reaction to resulting casualties in such an instance is an entirely different matter far beyond the scope of this discussion.

### DUTY PERFORMANCE

Female soldiers, almost without exception, proved to be outstanding workers. I consider this to be unusually important in view of the MOS diversity within the battalion. I cannot think of any area in which either the type of work required or the work environment adversely affected female performance. (More comments later about strength.)

My initial concerns about the "emotional

female” were groundless. I did not have a problem with “crying girls” or anything of the sort. I did, however, find that female soldiers were quicker to express opinions, question procedures, and insure that instructions were understood.

Female soldiers earned their share of awards, promotions, and other recognition. Here, several instances come to mind. Of seven females taking the very demanding test for the “Expert Field Medical Badge,” all seven met the requirements and received the award. Four were selected as Battalion “Soldier of the Quarter,” and two became Brigade “Soldier of the Quarter.” One female soldier received distinction as Honor Graduate and recipient of the MacArthur Leadership Award from the USAREUR leadership course.

In the overall area of leadership, my comments will be generalized and based upon relatively little observation. The battalion simply did not have many female NCOs and officers. (The lack of female NCOs and officers is an Army-wide problem and can only be solved as time-in-grade requirements are met and as ROTC, OCS, and USMA input increases.) My opinion, not surprisingly, is that female leadership is directly related to background, training, and experience. Those females who had been previously allowed to develop as soldiers were good leaders. Those who had been relegated to “traditional” roles were not. As indicated by a Human Resources Research Organization study, this observation apparently holds true throughout the Army.<sup>9</sup>

### REACTION OF WIVES

In early 1975, when the US Navy ended its pilot “Women-at-Sea” program, Navy wives publicly expressed the fear that their marriages were threatened by the changing role of military women. The Navy dissipated these fears through a program of informative shipboard meetings. A later study indicated that 64 percent of Navy enlisted women had experienced resentment from wives.<sup>10</sup> This problem area seems to cross service lines. Of the three companies in the 64th Support

Battalion, only one unit experienced any real reaction. The resentment, or perhaps jealousy, stemmed from extensive field duty requiring husbands and female soldiers to be absent from home station. The intense unit esprit, strangely, seemed to fuel the resentment. Regardless of facts or information made available to the wives of this unit, the resentment persisted. It was never expressed openly, nor did it adversely affect the unit. It did, however, remain low-key and active within a segment of the wives. The reason for this unrest in only one company and not throughout the battalion was, in my judgment, gossip. Sadly, there seemed to be an element which would take a positive unit accomplishment and delight in starting negative rumors. It should be noted that the resentment among these wives stemmed from misunderstandings and not from factual situations. In the other companies, the wives accepted facts or at least asked questions. But in spite of those difficulties within that one company, open discussion and a free flow of information seemed to be the best methods for countering the negative reactions of wives. Unfortunately, due to the distances involved, we were not able to use the Navy’s method and invite wives to a “family day” in the field. Had this been possible, perhaps even the problems we did experience might have been completely solved.

### MALE/FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS

In activating and organizing the battalion, I was initially concerned about the “sex” aspect of large numbers of young men and women working and living in such a close relationship. While personal relationships did evolve, a moral decline did not, and unit effectiveness was not impaired. Contrary to my expectations, a “pairing off” did not occur. Rather, a “brother-sister” relationship seemed to exist throughout each unit and, to an extent, throughout the battalion. The fact that female soldiers lived within company billets and were in every way treated as members of the unit greatly assisted in developing this attitude.

In my mind, the "brother-sister" attitude also dispelled the oft-repeated rumor that women join the Army to find a husband. Some, in fact, do get married, but my experience indicates that in general the motive for enlisting was other than marriage. (The battalion deployed to Germany with 15 married couples. At the end of my command tour, this number had increased to 22.)

My conversations with female soldiers confirm the findings of P. J. Thomas, who reported:

The Army provided opportunities not otherwise perceived to be available. They could travel, receive a practical job oriented education while being paid for training, meet new and interesting people and try something that is very different from anything they had done previously. . . . The Army also provides a sense of security and a second home.<sup>11</sup>

The team spirit or "brother-sister" attitude was a very positive aspect of the battalion's esprit. The natural rivalry of males and females working together also proved beneficial. Females worked to outperform males and males worked hard to "stay ahead." Physical training runs were interesting, as neither males nor females wanted to be first to quit. In fact, almost all of our female soldiers opted for the male running standard of 2 miles in 17 minutes.

### EQUIPMENT

Several items of equipment designed for or issued to female soldiers were not adequate. The most notable were the female fatigues and their field jacket. The lightweight material of these items was entirely unsuitable for field duty during cold weather. To overcome this, all female soldiers were allowed to wear male fatigues and were issued male field jackets with liners. In addition, all female soldiers were given a complete issue of standard cold weather gear, although difficulty in obtaining sufficient "small" sizes was experienced. Also, in many instances, the protective mask was found to

be poorly designed for fitting female soldiers, not, as might be expected, because of their hair length, but because of their facial structure. Likewise, "flak vests" and rainsuits were difficult to fit for female use. The Army has since recognized these equipment problems and has initiated a program for redesign and replacement of many of these female items.

### PHYSICAL STRENGTH

According to one study, "The mean strength of the female is estimated to range somewhere between 40-70 percent of the male, taking into account her lower body weight, muscle mass and level of muscle training."<sup>12</sup> Although I never found a female soldier unwilling to attempt a demanding task, the lack of strength was a continuing problem. The most noticeable impact involved tasks requiring upper body strength. As I indicated in my remarks concerning field duty, however, in practice ways were found to overcome this problem. Mixed work crews worked well, or in the case of all-female crews, longer periods of time were allowed for job completion. The important fact was that female soldiers were required to work to capacity. This insured a team effort. In units where female strength was not concentrated—such as the signal platoon, with only four or five women—difficulties were minimal. However, a high percentage of females in one unit, such as was experienced in the ambulance platoon, can cause problems. I had serious concern about whether this platoon could function in a sustained combat environment without the addition of male soldiers. The demands of transporting loaded litters would have been too great. Proper distribution of female soldiers within a unit presents no problem, but persistently high concentrations in MOSs requiring sustained heavy lifting could render a unit ineffective.

### SOLE PARENTS

In closing, I should comment upon one additional aspect: the female soldier who is

also a sole parent. In my experience, especially in a field unit, the conflicts of parental responsibility and duty requirements are too great. (The same, it must be said, is true for the male soldier who is a sole parent.) As a commander, I could not allow preferential treatment for any soldier. The sole parent problem came to a head during one exercise when a female soldier requested exemption from field duty. To grant the exception would have caused extra work for another soldier. Her unfortunate options were to face disciplinary action, to request discharge, or to accompany her unit to the field. Under these circumstances, she chose discharge.

A partial solution to the sole parent problem would be to discharge sole parents and, further, to allow only one member of a family with children to remain on active duty. The recent passing of Public Law 95-610, prohibiting unionization of the military, offers a precedent which illustrates the balance required between military necessity and individual right. Its underlying principle might well be useful in solving such still-to-be-resolved problems as sole parentage and pregnancy within the Army and the other services as well.

**A**s a battalion commander, I had an outstanding group of female soldiers, and I am proud to have had them in my unit. As with any soldier, they were as capable as NCO leadership developed them to be. I was also fortunate to have had a chain of command above me which allowed the

battalion to be flexible in dealing with female soldiers. Common sense was the rule, and higher authority did not burden me with "policy." I think that this was very important, as soldiers should be treated as soldiers, recognizing differences when necessary. I found that female soldiers, when treated as such, responded ably and acted as outstanding soldiers.

#### NOTES

1. Of 102 documents reviewed, only one contained a record of personal experience: *Military Review*, May 1978.
2. *Women Content in Units Force Development Test (MAX WAC)* (Alexandria, Va.: Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 1977), p. IV-9.
3. C. D. Johnson, B. H. Cory, and R. W. Day, *Women Content in the Army—Reforger '77 (Ref WAC 77)* (Alexandria, Va.: Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 1977), p. V-3.
4. *Ibid.*, p. V-4.
5. *Use of Women in the Military* (Washington: Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense—Manpower and Reserve Affairs, 1977), p. 27.
6. *The Final Report of the Women in the Army Study Group* (Washington: Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, 1976), pp. 5-7.
7. *Use of Women in the Military*, p. 28. "Lost time" includes absences for medical reasons, AWOLs, desertion, etc.
8. One of the best overviews and historical summaries is Norma Scott Kinzer, *Historical and Cross-Cultural Perspectives of Women in Combat* (Alexandria, Va.: Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 1976).
9. D. S. Holmes, *Leadership and Women in Organizations* (Alexandria, Va.: Human Resources Research Organization, 1969), p. 53.
10. P. J. Thomas, *Role of Women in the Military: Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States* (San Diego: Navy Personnel Research and Development Center, 1978), p. 40.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
12. M. M. Glumm, *The Female in Military Equipment Design* (Aberdeen Proving Ground, Md.: Human Engineering Lab, 1976), p. 7.

